

Coverage of so called Islamic State (IS), as with the reporting of the jihadi threat in the “war against terror” in general, continues to be confused, even in the hands of the most effective practitioners. The extremists' loss of control over their caliphate is not being ignored but the story is being constantly obfuscated by a lingering determination to buy into a frame of terror exactly echoing their hyperbolic rhetoric.

Take, at random, a BBC *World News Today* story on October 27 about a village taken from the terrorist group by the Peshmerga during the battle for Mosul. Filed by one of the media's best reporters, the corporation's Middle East correspondent, Orla Guerin, it perfectly illustrates this confusion in an everyday fashion. The BBC typically adopted this tone for the occasion — a story more about continued threat rather than looming defeat of IS.

As the *New York Times* put it on October 20, “Isis moves the goal posts,” ie still the protagonist not a victim. This inclination to see the glass as never better than half empty has, of course, constantly characterised the reporting of these atrocities and military conflicts. The Anglophone press, especially, has been supplying the jihadis with cylinders replete with the oxygen of publicity throughout their campaign. In contrast, in July, under the headline, “Resisting the strategy of hate”, *Le Monde* took this in hand with a self-denying ordinance not to splash pictures and names of the perpetrators of the mayhem. But few others have followed its lead, much less extended its logic. Certainly none of our papers have, which is unsurprising given the vice-like grip of the “if it bleeds it leads” dogma.

There was no bleeding, however, in the BBC's coverage. In fact, the one corpse in Guerin's report was decorously out of focus. The film still topped the bulletin. The news of Mosul, the last stronghold of the extremists who call themselves the Islamic State” being under attack suggested “a crossing of the Rhine” moment but it was not to be so reported. Rather, the language gave it the feel of a “battle of the bulge” counter-attack. “Islamic State,” said the newscaster, “are *hitting back* with scores of suicide bombers.” The thought occurred, though — you mean, by futilely killing themselves in increasing numbers? The BBC newscaster went on to highlight instead that “a vast network of tunnels has been uncovered,” setting this up as evidence of organisation and sophistication rather than of a spent force cowering (shall we say) in holes in the ground.

In fact, in one hole. Guerin, of course, was not responsible for the sensationalising of the one tunnel she filmed. However, she did encourage the folk in London in their overstatement with her own description of the find as “an elaborate warren”. “Isis fighters could live and move around safe from airstrikes and surveillances drones,” she said. And her payoff to the report had her “musing” (to deploy an evocative term) that we viewers needed to “imagine” the extent of what “lies waiting under the streets of Mosul”. So here is a hidey-hole from an aerial bombardment presented not as evidence of an army being degraded but rather as a trace of their continued impregnability. The failed defence — the place was empty, after all — and the logically implied victory of her final thought (Mosul is going to fall) were contextualised by the original frame of IS as an unbounded, sophisticated military threat.

Surrounded by the detritus of a defeat, Guerin of course reported that “time has run out here for Isis”, but the overriding register of the language remained that the menace was somehow unimpeded. The tunnel was under a mosque *commandeered* by IS loyalists not, more neutrally, occupied by them. The village was abandoned, not taken by the advancing Peshmerga. It was not the face of imminent defeat that had the jihadis leaving booby-traps, lighting barrels of crude oil as smokescreens, using the innocent as human shields; rather all this was given as evidence of their continued coherence as a military force. Thus, “airstrikes by the US and Britain are a key element in this battle but the Kurds say the enemy is *cunning* and is *adapting*”. Evidence: “Isis have started putting snipers inside the wreckage” — but this wreckage was not wrought by them. It has been inflicted on them. And all this cunning tactical adaption is possibly better described in military terms as a rear-guard action. However, that what we were seeing might be explained as a mopping-up phase was not explored. As a viewer I could not know if this was what, in fact, was under way All I could deduce was that the images presented and the facts stated could be more reasonably reflected in the terms of “defeat” and “loss” — words the BBC did not use — rather than elaborate ploys, effective tactics, adaptability and cunning. Although the pictures suggested it, the military reality of defeat — even setback — was not the context.

There is editorial choice in play here. It was dramatically illustrated by the decision (correct in my view) to show an IS fighter's corpse out of focus. And it was also to

be seen in the language of the editorial line, whether consciously or not. The rhetorical frame of the reporting — and not just on the BBC, of course — potentially distorts. This is not to deny the daily flow of news suggesting the distance that has still to be travelled before we can sleep easy. But it is to question the efficacy of the “terror threat” frame whether in reporting the Middle East or closer to home. This “threat” can be retailed or it can be investigated. It can be grounded in an assumption of fundamental futility or it can accept the rhetoric of uncontrollable, murderous disruption. The press needs to refocus; boundless menace no longer serves.